



Commas

WHY use commas?

Commas are rhetorical tools. We use commas to prevent confusion and emphasize information.

HOW do they work?

Commas separate, introduce, and show information.

WHEN to use commas?

Contrary to what you may have heard, comma rules aren't set in stone—but there are some guidelines that you have to know before you can begin to manipulate the rules! Commas...

• SEPARATE CLAUSES

Commas often separate an *independent clause* (a phrase that can stand alone as a sentence) from a **dependent clause** (a phrase that can't stand alone).

Today is a day you will have good luck, if you see a squirrel on your way to class.

• SEPARATE PARENTHETICAL PHRASES

Parenthetical phrases interrupt other phrases or clauses, and contain extra information that could be removed from the sentence without changing the sentence's core meaning.

The Writing Center, *a popular academic space*, was once a bear's den.

• SEPARATE INTRODUCTORY PHRASES

An *introductory phrase* is a phrase at the beginning of the sentence (usually a **dependent clause**) that provides background information for the main sentence.

Although it was ten years old, the dessert still looked freshly baked.

• BALANCE TWO INDEPENDENT CLAUSES (WITH A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION)

Two independent clauses can be two separate sentences, or can be combined into one sentence using a comma and a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, yet, for, nor, so*).

The children wanted ice cream, *but* the parents wanted cake.

WHEN NOT to use commas?

Although comma rules can be flexible, there are some “don’ts” when it comes to comma usage.

- DON’T SEPARATE THE VERB FROM ITS SUBJECT OR OBJECT

Paul, played the bass. ---> Paul played the bass.
(*Paul* is the subject, *played* is the verb.)

Ringo pounded, the drums. ---> Ringo pounded the drums.
(*Pounded* is the verb, *the drums* is the object.)

- DON’T USE A COMMA BETWEEN AN ADJECTIVE AND A NOUN

The white, rabbit was running late. ---> The white rabbit was running late.

- DON’T USE A COMMA BEFORE THE FIRST ITEM IN A SERIES

Teddy uses his degrees in, chemistry, biology, and physics to research alien life.

---> Teddy uses his degrees in chemistry, biology, and physics to research alien life.

- DON’T USE A COMMA AFTER A COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

Gilbert was handsome yet, mean.

---> Gilbert was handsome, yet mean.
OR Gilbert was handsome yet mean.

(You can use a comma **before** the coordinating conjunction if you want, but you don’t have to, since the two clauses are not independent clauses. Whether or not you put a comma before the coordinating conjunction in cases like this will depend on how much you want to emphasize the piece after the conjunction.)